

ON THE NET

Vocabulary Support for Independent Online Reading

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Frequent reading practice is one of the best ways to develop vocabulary and improve reading comprehension. Extensive reading (reading large amounts of text without worrying too much about details or looking up all vocabulary) and intensive reading (closely examining meaning and structures to be sure you figure out all the details) are both highly productive vocabulary builders in their own way (Munby, 1979). The accessibility of a huge variety of authentic reading material online is a boon to all who wish to use and practice their language skills in the real world. Independent online reading is also an excellent way to encourage the motivated learner to become engaged in real interpretive communication by reading authentic texts for interesting content rather than solely for language practice. This practice also builds on the Connections and Communities standards by (a) connecting to other subject areas of particular interest to the individual learner and (b) starting them down the path of lifelong learning and showing them how they can continue to use the language long for their own purposes long after they have left school (National Standards, 1999). In a previous column, "[Literacy: Reading on the Net](#)," we examined some sites that could help teach reading. In this column, we will look at a couple of sites that can help students read on their own.

Ultralingua.net

When students learn to browse online news and magazine sites for articles that interest them personally, they can become more highly motivated to continue to use their language skills long term because this is a real, day-to-day use of those skills, not just a classroom exercise. They have a purpose for reading the text, a variable that facilitates comprehension (Knutson, 1997). The main difficulty they will encounter in reading authentic texts on their own is the need for vocabulary support. While the research to date is somewhat inconclusive in terms of the best way to provide vocabulary support online (e.g., word-level dictionary equivalents vs. sentence-level equivalents), most subjects in such research studies state that they definitely prefer some manner of immediate or computer-assisted support rather than more traditional ways of ferreting out word meaning (Gettys, Imhof, & Kautz, 2001). Some of these traditional means include glossing selected words at the bottom of a page, in the page margins, or in a glossary located elsewhere in the text. They also include the obvious practice of using a separate dictionary. In all such vocabulary support there are trade-offs between ease of accessibility and intrusiveness. How do we avoid the gloss turning into a distraction from reading? By making it as easy as possible to look up unknown words, the reading process can become more transparent. One online tool that uses the hypertext nature of the Web to provide exactly this type of support is [Ultralingua.Net](#).



Filtering articles through Ultralingua.Net will give students interactive vocabulary help by turning every word into a link that opens a pop-up dictionary entry for that word. Languages supported by Ultralingua currently include English, French, Spanish, German, Italian, and Portuguese. For example, an English as a second language (ESL) business student reading *The Economist* can insert the URL (Web page address) for the magazine article and choose "English definitions" for the pop-up dictionary selection (see below).

Definitions & translations

[Search help](#)

Or: type (or paste) the URL of a web page (on any site), choose the translation or definition option you would like enabled, and press "submit." The resulting page will provide a replica of the original URL -- but you can click on any word in order for a quick translation or definition. [More information...](#)

Ultralingua displays a copy of the article from *The Economist*. Although the new page looks the same, all of the words are now hypertext links. Clicking on a word will open a pop-up window with vocabulary support in the form of an English definition. By picking a preferred dictionary option, as seen in the drop-down listing, the user can have a choice of the kind of vocabulary support presented.

In the example below, we see the definition that appears when we click on the word "resolution" in the article.

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Latest news

eaths, a modicum of justice

UN Security Council's [resolution](#) to refer people suspected of war crimes in Sudan's to the International Criminal Court has been hailed as "historic". But without a large-scale intervention in Darfur, the murders are likely to end soon ... [more](#)

Also on the site...

Crowned at last

The claim that "the customer is king" has always rung hollow. But now the digital

Definitions & translations

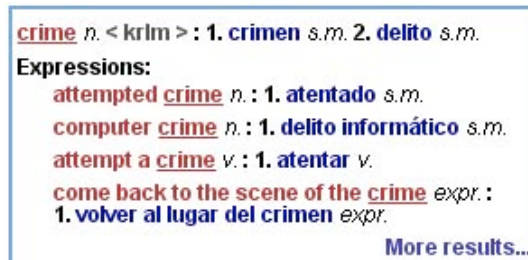
[Search help](#)

resolution *n.* resolutions < "rèz&'lú[sh]&n > : 1. A solution to a problem; **SYN:** solving. 2. The process leading to the solution to a problem; **SYN:** solving. 3. Analysis into clear-cut components; **SYN:** resolving. 4. A formal expression by a meeting; agreed to by a vote; **SYN:** declaration, resolve. 5. A dissonant chord is followed by a consonant chord. 6. The number of pixels per square inch on a computer-generated display; the greater the resolution, the better the picture. [Computer science] [**ETYM:** French *résolution*. Latin *resolutio* a loosening, solution. **Related to Resolve.**]

Expressions:

joint resolution *n.* < [foi]nt "rèz&'lú[sh]&n > :

Unlike translation sites that try to translate a text by using a single meaning of each word, too often the wrong meaning, Ultralingua's definitions let the reader see the possible meanings and figure out the right one from context. If the student prefers a translation, Ultralingua can also be used like a bilingual dictionary to check possible meanings of a word by selecting from among the options given. Below we see the Spanish translation provided in the same article for the word "crime" when we choose the English-Spanish option instead of English definitions.



Ultralingua also offers regular dictionary lookup for individual words, verb conjugation assistance, numbers, and online grammar references. As indicated above, texts in English, French, Spanish, German, Italian, and Portuguese may be read with Ultralingua support.

WordChamp

Other sites provide similar vocabulary support. Which is best? It may simply be a matter of preference, and Web sites may come and go or change quickly on the Internet, so it behooves us to explore these sites occasionally to see what is new. Another good service that also uses pop-up windows is the [WebDecoder section of WordChamp](#).



WordChamp's pop-up dictionary help for online Web sites is freely accessible, though some of WordChamp's other features require creating an account. As with Ultralingua, the user provides the address of the Web page to be read and then WordChamp turns the words on the page into active links for the pop-up windows. Rather than having to click on the word, WordChamp pops up the window as soon as the mouse moves over the desired word. In the example below, we have placed the mouse over the word, "*a commencé*," and the tool correctly identifies the *passé composé* tense and offers three possible translations into English. Audio is also available but only for those with an account.



WordChamp can indicate which words have pop-up help by highlighting them. Such highlights can be useful, confusing, or distracting, depending on the site and the individual reader, so the user can change the highlight color preference or turn it off entirely if desired. As with Ultralingua, additional features are available such as look-up for individual words, flash-card creation, vocabulary testing, verb conjugation, and audio. WordChamp's search feature has the advantage of displaying examples of usage from literature. In the sample below, we see 114 examples of usage for the word "*crainte*."

Where to search?	Enter a word or phrase:	search
Words, Lists, and Users	crainte	

Search Results
No flashcards, vocabulary lists, or users found for 'crainte'. Please check your spelling and try again.
Quotes
<p>114 examples of usage found for 'crainte'</p> <p>Pages: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12</p> <p>Une crainte stupéfiante, qu'elle n'eut pas le temps de chasser, l'engourdit presque et ce fut malgré elle qu'elle se laissa rejoindre, puis distancer, par un inconnu jeune et pressé qui ne la regarda pas. — Colette, <i>Chéri</i>, 1920</p> <p>Elle prit le parti de rire, avec une désinvolture qui cachait déjà une grande crainte. — Colette, <i>Chéri</i>, 1920</p> <p>Je ne comprenais pas la moitié des mots que disait la dame, mais la crainte que n'y fut cachée quelque question à laquelle il eût été impoli de ne pas répondre, m'empêchait de cesser de les écouter avec attention, et j'en éprouvais une grande fatigue. — Marcel Proust, <i>Du côté de chez Swann</i>, 1913</p>

WordChamp outperforms Ultralingua in terms of the number of languages supported. The impressive listing includes: Bengali, Bulgarian, Burmese, Cambodian, Catalan, Chinese (Cantonese), Chinese (Mandarin), Croatian, Czech, Danish, Dutch, English, Farsi, Finnish, French, German, Greek, Hebrew, Hindi, Hungarian, Indonesian, Irish, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Kurdish, Latin, Lithuanian, Malay, Marathi, Norwegian, Pashto, Polish, Portuguese, Punjabi, Romanian, Russian, Sanskrit, Serbian, Sindhi, Singhalese, Slovak, Spanish, Swahili, Swedish, Tagalog, Tamil, Telugu, Thai, Tibetan, Turkish, Ukrainian, Urdu, Vietnamese, and Yiddish. On the other hand, Ultralingua's pop-ups tend to have more detailed vocabulary information and give the user more control over the displayed dictionary entry, but WordChamp's search feature provides good examples of usage, as we saw above. Both fall a bit short in their handling of more difficult or less common words, but both do a good job with the basics. We expect that such tools will continue to improve over time.

Integrating Vocabulary Web Tools in Your Curriculum

We recommend that when introducing students to online vocabulary helpers such as these the teacher also provide links to suggested reading materials targeted for those particular students as well as recommendations for how to approach the reading process. In an example of such a page, one of the authors of this column gives French college students studying business English a listing of online magazines and suggestions of activities to help build vocabulary:

<http://web.cortland.edu/ponterior/english/reading.html>

For these students preparing for a career in business, the sites suggested are business related. They include the business sections of some well known English language newspapers, a variety of magazines with articles about business and economics, a page with a listing of news sites for British expatriates, and a radio site for combining listening comprehension with reading. The activities suggested include

- Write a few sentences in your own words giving the gist of the article.
- Summarize each paragraph's main points in your own words.
- Maintain your personal list of new or difficult vocabulary words and expressions.
- Write a one-paragraph reaction to the facts and opinions in the article.
- Tell someone else about the article you read.

All of these activities are designed to encourage the reader to manipulate the information and vocabulary gleaned from the reading passages. Focusing on meaning and doing something with the passages read will help reinforce vocabulary acquisition.

Conclusion

Many variables are involved in second language reading comprehension. Topic familiarity, interest, and purposeful selection of texts (in varying combinations) are just a few that have been shown to enhance comprehension (Carrell & Wise, 1998). These variables are also likely to have an impact on the selection of texts by second language learners for independent and/or pleasure reading. The provision of vocabulary support for such reading can significantly improve the learner's reading comprehension. By providing links to quality sites where students can find engaging and possibly familiar reading related to their curriculum, purposes, or interests, along with helpful online tools and suggested activities, the teacher has made the entire process easier for the student because everything needed is readily available in one location and accessible from anywhere. By making the reading process less daunting and more successful, we hope that students will be encouraged to continue using the language and improving linguistic skills well beyond the classroom experience.

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